

The “China Threat” and the Solomon Islands

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*Rarely has the Solomon Islands had as much attention as this. Despite being in caretaker mode as it battles the federal election, the government of Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** still had room to politicise its anti-China twitch. The person given the task of doing so was the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, **Senator Zed Seselja**.*

In a quick visit to Honiara to have discussions with **Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare**, Seselja [stated](#) that Australia remained dedicated to supporting the security needs of the Solomon Islands, and would do so “swiftly, transparently and with full respect for its sovereignty”. The Pacific country remained a friend, part of the “Pacific family”.

While not specifically condemning the waywardness of the Sogavare government in forging closer ties with Beijing, Seselja explicitly mentions that discussions included “the proposed Solomon Islands-China security agreement.” Using the familiar talking point of pushing regional familial ties, the Minister insisted that “the Pacific family will always meet the security needs of our region.” In a tone suggesting both plea and clenched fist, Seselja went on to claim that Solomon Islands had been “respectfully” asked to reject the pact and “consult the Pacific family in the spirit of regional openness and transparency, consistent with our region’s security frameworks.”

The origins of this badgering stem from the Sino-Solomon Islands [draft security agreement](#) published online by an adviser to the disgruntled Malaita Provincial Government of Premier Derek Suidani. That, in of itself, was telling of local domestic tussles, given Suidani’s opposition to increasing influence from Beijing and his own tilt towards Taiwan.

According to Article 1 of the [draft](#), the Solomon Islands may request China to “send police, police military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces” for reasons of maintaining social order, protecting lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or “providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties”.

With the consent of Honiara, China may also “make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands”. Chinese personnel may also be used in protecting Chinese personnel and projects on the islands.

Amongst Australia’s talking heads and hacks was a sense of horror. Greg Sheridan, [writing for *The Australian*](#), saw parallels with Japan’s aims during the Second World War “to isolate Australia from the US by occupying Pacific territories, specifically Guadalcanal in what is now the Solomons.” The same paper described the deal as “a nightmare in paradise.”

Canberra and Washington are also concerned by what is seen as a lack of candour on the part of Beijing, a tad rich coming from powers that mischievously formed the AUKUS pact in conditions of total secrecy. Article 5 expressly notes that “neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to a third party” without written consent of the other party, [which has been taken to mean](#) that citizens of the Solomon Islands are not to know the content of the agreement. That would put them in a similar position to Australians who have an incomplete picture on the role played by US military installations such as Pine Gap, or the broader expectations of AUKUS.

The extent Sogavare and his ministers are being badgered by Australian dignitaries is notable. Their message: We acknowledge your independence as long as it is exercised in our national (read US) interest. This was the theme of the [visit](#) earlier this month from **Paul Symon**, chief of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, and **Andrew Shearer**, Director-General of the Office of National Intelligence.

According [to a note](#) from Sogavare’s office, the visitors discussed “Australia’s core security concerns” about a potential Chinese military presence in the country. Both Symon and Shearer were told that Honiara’s “security concerns are domestically focused and complements [the] current bilateral Agreement with Australia and the regional security architecture.”

This view is unlikely to have swayed officials tone deaf to local concerns. The Biden administration, playing tag team to Australia’s efforts, [has given](#) **Kurt Campbell**, the US National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, the task of changing Sogavare’s mind. He promises to visit the Pacific state along with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, **Daniel Kritenbrink**, later this month.

US lawmakers are also keen to hold the fort against Chinese influence in the Pacific and are excited about the prospects of using Australian soil to do so. Republican **Senator Lindsey Graham** sees the garrisoning of Australia with US troops as an answer. “I see an opening in this part of the world to push back on China in a way that would fundamentally change the fear that you have of a very bad neighbour,” [he told](#) Sky News Australia on April 13.

The proposed Honiara-Beijing pact shows how neither Australia, nor the US, can hope to buy Honiara’s unqualified allegiance to its own policies. It worried Australian **Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews**, [who responded](#) to the news of the draft by claiming that, “This is our neighbourhood and we are very concerned of any activity that is taking place in the Pacific Islands.”

To date, Solomon Islands has been treated as a failed state, a security risk in need of pacification, and a country distinctly incapable of exercising plenary power. Australia has adopted an infantilising, charity-based approach, shovelling billions into the Regional

Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Australian High Commissioner **Lachlan Strahan** was quick to reassure Sogavare that Canberra would be extending the mission till December 2023, while also providing \$AU21.5 million in budget support, a second patrol boat outpost and a national radio network.

None of these ongoing factors have prevented discussions between Honiara and Beijing on security issues. Chinese police officers [were sent](#) to the Solomon Islands in February, forming the People’s Republic of China Public Security Bureau’s Solomon Islands Policing Advisory Group. Their mission: aiding the local police force in improving their “anti-riot capabilities”.

Local politics, deeply divisive as they are, will have to eventually dictate the extent with which various powers are permitted influence. Solomon Islands Opposition Leader Matthew Wale is very much against the gravitational pull of China. Last year, [he attempted](#) to convince Australian officials, including the High Commissioner, that the draft was a serious possibility. With the prospect of further jockeying between Washington, Canberra and Beijing, Honiara promises to be a very interesting place. Along the way, it might actually prove to its meddlesome sceptics that sovereignty is possible.

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